

TESTIMONY OF

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Montana Conservation Corps, Executive Director

IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 51

"AN ACT FORMALLY ELIMINATING STATE ADMINISTRATION OF THE MONTANA CONSERVATION CORPS BY REPEALING OBSOLETE STATUTES THAT PLACE THE MONTANA CONSERVATION CORPS WITHIN THE PARKS DIVISION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE, AND PARKS, SUBJECT TO THE OVERSIGHT OF THE OFFICE OF COMMUNITY SERVICE; AMENDING SECTION 90-14-103, MCA; REPEALING SECTIONS 23-1-301, 23-1-302, 23-1-303, 23-1-311, 23-1-312, 23-1-313, AND 23-1-314, MCA; AND PROVIDING AN IMMEDIATE EFFECTIVE DATE."

Thank you Madame Chair, members of the State Administration Committee, and Representative Pomnichowski for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 51.

HB 51 removes obsolete language in the Montana Code. It does not in any way impact the productive relationship between the Montana Conservation Corps, a Montana charitable nonprofit organization, and the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

The Board of Directors of the Montana Conservation Corps supports this bill, believing it removes any possible confusion in Montana statute about the independent status of the Conservation Corps, and it clears the way for continued public/private partnerships between MCC and the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

Given the present status of our strong partnership, you may wonder how this obsolete statute came to be. Let me report on the origins of the Corps.

In the 1980's, inspired by the successes of programs like the Depression era Civilian Conservation Corps and later programs like the Youth Conservation Corps, Peace Corps and VISTA, leaders in Montana began working toward the creation of Montana's own conservation corps to provide workforce development opportunities for young people while improving natural resources in our state. These efforts resulted in legislation and an initial appropriation in 1989 for the creation of the corps within the Parks Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. However, the next year, a Special Legislative Session responding to state budget shortfalls withdrew the funding.

In order to keep the momentum for a corps moving forward, the directors of the Human Resources and Development Councils in Billings, Bozeman, and Kalispell who'd been collaborating with FWP to establish the corps, stepped up with commitments of their own resources, and by registering MCC as a private nonprofit corporation, enabling the organization to pursue other financial support.

Montana Conservation Corps has thrived these last 16 years as a private nonprofit organization. In our most recent national competitive AmeriCorps grant application, MCC was described as "a model program amongst conservation corps around the country" and awarded a \$1.3 million grant to support conservation and community service activities in Montana. This grant is matched at better than a 1:1 ratio, more than doubling the reach of these federal dollars through partnerships with over 150 agencies, including community organizations and local, state, and federal agencies - the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks among these. Today, MCC is governed by a Board of Directors with representation from across the state. Year after year, annual audits with unqualified opinions demonstrate the highest levels of governance and fiscal accountability. Indeed, Montanans should be proud of their corps - a program they helped launch through the legislature and which now stands solidly on its own feet with no cost to the state.

The cumulative impacts of sixteen years of conservation and community service are immense. Consider that last year, MCC participants, including 150 AmeriCorps members, local teens committing 5 weeks of their summer to our Montana Youth Engaged in Service program, and more than 600 volunteers, contributed over 190,000 hours to accomplish meaningful projects of lasting benefit in our communities.

The result of all this service work is that over 5000 miles of recreational trail has been constructed or maintained these past 16 years to sustain safe access to our public lands and to community trails. This represents more than 1/3 of all inventoried trails in Montana.

In just the last three years, MCC has improved over 10,000 acres of wildlife habitat, including over 3000 acres treated for noxious weeds and 1100 acres of wildfire fuels reduction. Our crews installed or repaired 261 miles of fencing, and planted 475,000 trees and shrubs to improve city

parks and restore riparian corridors. MCC members have had a hand in building or renovating 372 structures for community groups – from restoring historic buildings in Virginia and Nevada City, to building houses for low income families.

In 2005 and 2006, MCC partnered with the Department of Public Health and Human Services and the 11 HRDC's across the state to help implement the Warm Hearts Warm Homes Montana program, providing low and no cost weatherization measures in over 2000 homes of low income residents. This cost-effective collaboration greatly enhances the human touch of these organizations.

The impacts on our participants' lives are just as significant. 97% report they had a positive experience with MCC, with 93% indicating they plan to continue being involved in their community as volunteers. Better than 9 in 10 of the youth participating in our MontanaYES youth corps program report improved skills and attitudes about work.

One participant stated at the end of his AmeriCorps term of service with MCC:

“Through volunteering with MCC, I've gained the foresight of a proactive citizen who values not only the hard work that goes along with volunteering, but also the results of such a commitment. In the past, I never really thought one person could make a difference, but now I feel that I can conquer any task and accomplish the change I want to be.”

Montana Conservation Corps urges the 60th Legislature to enact House Bill 51. We are confident that this bill is a simple means to update Montana statute and ensure a continued productive relationship between the MCC and the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and others.

Thank you for hearing this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you may have concerning MCC and HB 51.